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Melanie Terrill

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# Behind The Face of Radio

**MELANIE TERRILL**

Melanie is a graduating senior majoring in English. She wrote this piece under the mentorship of Professor Michelle Cox. Writing has always been a part of who she is and she hopes it continues with her into her future. Though unsure of what life after Bridgewater may bring, she is always interested in where books may take her and where the -- more literal -- public transportation may drop her next. She finds flying cross-country liberating, and library shelves endearing.

I can remember lying in my room at night, years ago before I barely knew CD players existed, relying on the songs on the radio to lull me to sleep. I remember recognizing songs and singing along, more interested in listening than sleeping. One particular song I remember listening to late at night is “Waterfalls” by TLC. I was eleven years old then, and had no real knowledge about the music industry. The name “Clear Channel” had not existed in my vocabulary. Now, though the industry continues to change, Clear Channel remains in control of it, and as a result the company affects what artists we are exposed to.

The radio. It’s something I used to swear by, the free service that opens doors for any music fan. Whether I’m hitting buttons or turning a knob to switch frequencies between stations, I’ve done it oh-so-often before. I love the way that songs flow into each other, disrupted by ads for consumerism, a reminder of what radio is really driven by. There are rare occasions -- when I’m a little tired of over playing my CDs, or it’s just too difficult to find that one album I’m looking for while driving -- that I still rely on the radio for some sort of entertainment value. And maybe the radio will always be there. Because, let’s face it, even if you don’t listen to it, don’t you still know most of the songs it plays? Not because you listen to that sort of music (or, okay, maybe you do) but it’s also because the music is everywhere. Pop music, for lack of a better word, has popped right into our lives, and will not allow us to forget it.

Listening to the radio today, there is a delightful mix of “pop” genres. There is the hip-hop pop where mostly female singers sing about life in the hip hop lane: Bianca, Cierra. Singer song-writers pour their hearts out into their guitars (John Mayer) while pop-rock artists (which are similar to singer-song writers, except with entire bands) are doing their thing: The Fray, Goo Goo Dolls. Then there are the newly undefined pop-punk meets emo tunes with bands whose male members sometimes wear eye liner, or exploit naked pictures of themselves on the internet: Fall Out Boy, Panic! At The Disco.

But what is it that drives these stations to play what they play? Why can I listen to the same station for, yet in the end I lose count of the number of times I’ve heard most of these songs? One hour of radio is all you need in a day, because after that, you are listening to just a different order of the same music.

Is radio today a reflection of the music industry, pregnant with every means to make that extra buck and sell one more album? It seems that music isn't just about the music anymore. Instead it's about what companies decide which music and image the public likes, or will like. Teenage girls are manufactured into sex symbols, their voices exploited to pop tunes and lip sync concerts. Bands fight to play what they want, and they lose the battle. Morning shows take over the AM hours replacing music with celebrity gossip. Commercials sink their way into the airwaves between songs and subliminally convince you that you need those new shows and to buy an extra handbag. By now you've forgotten about the songs that just played. You can hear them again. It is about control, and what's controlling this is something larger. I knew that there was a company controlling this, one that's unknown to many college-aged listeners, but influential nonetheless. The company, Clear Channel, has slowly been infiltrating our radio stations, making the radio what it is today.

Lowry Mays and Red McCombs founded Clear Channel in 1972. The name comes from a term in AM radio where only one station hits that frequency. The company, whose headquarters are located in San Antonio, Texas, owns exclusive rights to all of their radio frequencies. The company is the largest owning radio station company in America, grossing over \$3.5 in 2005 alone.

Clear Channel owns over 989 radio stations (including 9 satellite stations) in the United States (48 in New England alone), and several television stations. On Clear Channel's website, there is a section that addresses "myths" about the company, in attempt to abolish rumors about their business. In most of these, however, they fail to be direct about what is being said about the station. The company is rumored to have play lists for radio stations, a knack for deciding what music people want to hear, and the ability to prevent other radio stations they do not own from playing these songs on their play lists. Though these are only rumors, they encase the company, which openly denies each of these claims.

For example, one of the myths is "Clear Channel Radio dominates radio in the United States." Clear Channel responds by saying that there are 13,000 radio stations and Clear Channel only owns 9%. What they do not mention, however, is how many of those 13,000 stations are AM, satellite or independently owned (such as college radio stations).

Another myth comments on radio consolidation, and the fact that is it at an all time high. Clear Channel does not actually respond to this, instead says that radio is the least consolidated form of media today. What Clear Channel does not mention, however, is that the company has the highest consolidation in the radio industry today. According to [stateofthenewsmedia.org](http://stateofthenewsmedia.org), Clear Channel's ownership makes up for the largest chunk of radio

consolidation. This means that they have the most influence on what is played on the radio today and ultimately, they have the most influence on radio listeners' exposure to music artists.

Two other myths -- "Clear Channel Radio restricts play lists and issues corporate mandates" and "Clear Channel Radio beams homogenized programming from central locations" -- are both answered in the same way. Clear Channel says that their stations are managed and programmed locally, based on research about their audience. It seems that, by addressing these rumors, the company is trying to cover its own tracks, explain itself and the root of myth, but all it does is dodge the questions.

Have you heard of Clear Channel? Perhaps you've seen their name in the corner of billboards, but haven't paid much attention to the name, or what it means. I wanted to know who knew about Clear Channel, and how they had heard about the company. I surveyed 12 Bridgewater State College students asking them how they feel about the radio, if they know about Clear Channel and how, and if they'd like to know more. I asked questions such as, "Do you listen to the radio today?" (Nine said yes, one said no and two said not often), how they feel about listening to the same songs over and over, and if they knew about Clear Channel.

The only two students who did know about Clear Channel heard about the company because of Howard Stern. In 2004, Clear Channel decided to eliminate indecent content from their airwaves, which was part of a "responsible broadcasting initiative." Howard Stern, who is known for explicit sexual content on his shows, had no intention of following Clear Channel's new initiative. His show, which aired on six Clear Channel stations, was later dropped from those stations all together.

These sort of radio-related problems made me think about other people, artists and bands that have been negatively affected by the radio. On their website, Clear Channel denies negatively impacting particular musicians. The first one is regarding Madonna. The rumor is that Clear Channel banned Madonna after she made some political comments. What the comments were isn't clear. Clear Channel denies this, offering the percentage of her new CD (29%) that's been played.

Clear Channel radio stations banned airplay of the Dixie Chicks after their political comments. This is the second rumor that the company addresses. They say that the company that banned Dixie Chicks was not them; it was a different company who had a CD smashing party in Atlanta, GA near its headquarters.

Clear Channel's effects on artists' and bands' radio airplay also contribute to music artists having problems with their

record labels. These problems are indirectly related to the radio because of consolidation. The labels dictate whether or not they want a band to make a new album, or if they will release a new album depending on whether or not they think the general public will like this music. The music, they assume, will ultimately be heard on the radio because it's a main source of promotion – 75% of CD purchases are influenced by songs heard on the radio.

I first heard about Clear Channel from the band Hanson. In 2002, Hanson began to have trouble with their record label Island Def Jam. In 2003, the band announced their split from their record label. Since then, Hanson has launched themselves into an independent campaign called Are You Listening? They set out to teach fans and anyone else who would listen about their struggle. Their documentary, *Strong Enough to Break*, has yet to hit the video stores, but in 2005, Hanson toured colleges in the United States and screened the film for students. After each screening they held a question and answer session. During these sessions, Hanson has done a good job letting their fans know about what problems they see in the music industry.

The one station I've heard their newest music played on is WPRO 92.3 out of Providence, Rhode Island. Their DJs are the only ones who haven't laughed me off the phone with my requests to play them. I found this fitting, because this station is not owned by Clear Channel, therefore providing a small link to why they'll play the band. It also said in Hanson's film that after putting out a record on their own, they could only afford to send their song off to fifteen radio stations in the United States.

Their campaign, "Are You Listening" (AYL), lists a multitude of "independent" bands, along with a message from the creators of the site, speaking out about radio. Part of AYL's message says, "Radio is more focused on selling advertising than on giving you good music, so they ignore you and take a lot of money from a few record companies to play those mediocre songs that keep you listening long enough to sell you something

Hanson is not the only band having trouble with their record labels. Both of Fiona Apple's first albums are considered platinum by the RIAA, but after she recorded her third album *Extraordinary Machine*, her record label decided not to release it. Sony didn't think *Extraordinary Machine* would sell enough so they decided to drop it all together.

Though Fiona Apple fans weren't happy about Sony's decision for *Extraordinary Machine*, they compensated by using P2P programs to spread leaked MP3s from the album all over the internet. The website *Free Fiona* was also launched to petition against Sony. In 2005, Fiona's album was finally released. Again Fiona Apple's

struggles are indirectly related to Clear Channel, and the radio industry today. Record labels remain in the best interests of themselves, and what music will help them make money. If they feel that artists such as Fiona Apple aren't producing music that will get radio play, the lack of radio play would result in lower album sales and companies like Sony can decide not to put out certain albums, or sign certain artists.

In mid-November 2006, Clear Channel was bought out by a group of private equity firms. Private equity firms use private equity funds to invest in specific companies. It isn't clear what this means for Clear Channel itself. The company has been talking of selling its television stations, and some of their radio stations that aren't Top 40. A lot of executives from Clear Channel remain in their positions, however, so the direction of the company can't really be predicted right now. Because they have so much influence in radio today, there is a lot of possibility for the company to use their powers for good.

Whether or not that happens, though, I can imagine there will always be the radio. For any person who was ever a fan of music, and for any band that ever wants their music played, they need the radio -- one of the only free forms of media. The radio is relied on as a source of entertainment, and a way to possibly hear a new song. If you've ever wanted to hear a certain band the radio won't play, or if you've ever wanted to smash the speakers in from hearing the same Britney Spears song over and over, you have a right to know what's behind those speakers. There's a good chance Clear Channel is somewhere in the great distance, influencing each and every song you hear. Though Clear Channel and the radio is morphing into something new and exciting everyday, the basis behind it is the same. Whether it's Satellite Radio or the free kind you listen to on a summer day in your car with the volume at high, and the windows rolled all the way down, it will be here along with us.